

A SEA OF CHANGE : CIVIL SOCIETY AND TURKISH POLITICS

For a long time Turkey has been administrated by a political triangle, where a few people at the top of the triangle were the agenda-setters and the decision makers. Media and business interests were basically in line with this philosophy and instead of challenging it, played along. During the last 5 years, a number of developments such as the coming of age of the NGO sector and growing influence of youth have begun to wear down this political triangle system. The November 2002 elections was the first time that political accountability has actually worked in the Turkish political process, a critical development that must be underscored. This is actually a victory for civil society and its constituents who have been working for a long time to promote change in the system

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In the recent difficulties experienced in the Turkey-US relationship, many of the problems stemmed from miscommunication and misunderstanding. This actually has resulted in a temporary breakdown in the relationship, mistrust on both sides and may have damaged the 'strategic partnership' developed over the last 50 years, and which had become especially strong in the last 5 years. Both sides are, in effect, responsible for the results and unfortunately both sides have suffered loss as a result. This article focuses on one of the main reasons that the US misread Turkey namely the current political and social transformation taking place in the country.

Turkey has in fact been going through a period of change, one that has had both social and political repercussions. For a long time Turkey has been administrated by a political triangle, where a few people at the top of the triangle were the agenda-setters and the decision makers. Media and business interests were basically in line with this philosophy and instead of challenging it, played along. Anything outside of this sphere did not have much of a say in matters, and public opinion did not matter. Politicians always knew that they could act against public opinion without much difficulty. The agenda would conveniently be changed so that no one got too caught up in one specific issue. Input from civil society and NGO's was minimal and the opinions of the youth- a vast majority- were not taken seriously. In essence our representative democracy was actually a hidden version of autocracy. There was always a wall around Ankara similar to the Berlin Wall but ours was invisible. People who dealt with Ankara and the bureaucracy knew that it was there and worked accordingly. If there was an issue that needed to be addressed, then with the right 7 or 8 people you could achieve results.

During the last 5 years, a number of developments have begun to wear down this political triangle system. One of course is the NGO sector, which has grown steadily and has begun to position itself better within society thus more effectively affecting public opinion. Secondly, the Internet and youth have begun to play a more important role. E-groups' and e-mail's are now a daily part of many people's lives and this has resulted in increased communication and easier access to information. As a result more young people are starting to demand better standards in government based on values and principles. Some of the values which have suddenly come into play are rule of law, accountability, transparency, ethics, and participatory democracy. This process, which has been developing over time, is similar to what the West did before 1989 with regard to the Berlin Wall.

An example of accountability can be clearly seen in the aftermath of the recent elections in Turkey. For a very long time, the weak leadership of the country has led many people to call for the resignations and retirement of many of the political party leaders who were

basically seen as incompetent. The results of the November 3 elections caused a number of leaders to finally leave the scene and others to permanently retire. Finally, after 30 years of the same faces and continued mismanagement, the people were able to exercise their will upon the leaders and force their hand. Several generations of leaders were liquidated in one election. It is the first time that political accountability has actually worked in the Turkish political process, a critical development that must be underscored. This is actually a victory for civil society and its constituents who have been working for a long time to promote change in the system.

International benchmarking processes have been extremely important in the development of Turkish society. The European Union and the International Monetary Fund along with other important institutions like the World Bank have played an integral part in Turkey's maturation process. The EU has played a key role in placing pressure points and deadlines on Ankara to keep the reform process moving as well as being instrumental in the formation of such values as rule of law, transparency and human rights. The IMF has played a critical role in establishing a new understanding in Turkey called economic discipline. This has created stronger criteria and a tighter policy which should result in a strong Turkey in the long run. Politicians do not have a free hand to play populist politics and important sectors in Turkey such as the banking sector are finally beginning to adhere to international standards.

The November 3 elections must be considered a turning point in Turkish politics, not necessarily because of the winners, but rather because of the losers and the fact that the Turkish public now knows how to change things. This is another critical outcome. Elections were always a foregone conclusion in Turkey, with the results never really in doubt. This time the outcome was different and the people feel empowered and will continue to utilize this new tool in future elections. The results of November 3 should be seen as a balance sheet picture which will be prone to change if the winning parties do not perform. And during the first 100 days of this Parliament, in my opinion, the two winning parties have not performed well at all.

The Turkish culture is one based entirely on short-term ideals. In other words, we are taught to look right in front of us and let other issues affecting the future be handled by others. As a result, people tend to make demands based solely on the short term as the future seems to be out of reach and not worth the effort. The Turkish society also has the tendency to jump on the 'band-wagon' when it seems like the right thing to do. It does not take the people a long time to adjust to attractive innovations which may seem attractive or support a growing opinion. Just as the people have warmed quickly to such innovative ideas such as the Internet and cellular phones, now the Turkish people have finally learned how to rid themselves of political figures and their followers.

The three governing parties lost a total of 40% of the vote that they received in April, 1999. In past election cycles, governing parties have never lost so much support in such a short period of time. They always received enough support from the 'opinion-making' bodies such as the media, business and opinion leaders to get themselves elected. As a result, the general public was led to believe that support for these parties would materialize during elections. This time it did not work. Once again there were attempts made to formulate the public's opinion of certain political leaders and parties but the public paid no attention. And from now on, the public will continue to ignore these attempts by opinion makers at image repair and will continue to search for better political solutions.

There is nothing to prevent the current parties in Parliament from facing a similar fate in the next election. If performance levels are again well below expectations then the public will move toward further change. The people now know that the political players that have been mismanaging the country for so long can no longer be tolerated because of their incompetence and corruption. And now the search has begun for new people and new leaders. This is another critical step in the ongoing maturation cycle, again one that has been misrepresented in Turkey by the media and opinion makers. It took quite a long time for the people to finally see through the maze of confusion that had been woven around them. It is important to note here that the search is in no way complete and will continue on into the next election cycles. In my opinion, Turkey needs to hold several elections over the next five years. If we were able to have two more general elections within this time span then Turkey's political situation would improve. Each election cycle leads to debate and serves to focus the demands and expectations placed upon the politicians. For example, in the 100+ days since the November elections, the expectations placed on the new Parliament have been quite high and already the public is questioning the actions of the new government and the opposition. The grace periods enjoyed by previous Parliaments that lasted for months and even years are a thing of the past. It may not be long before some people in Turkey begin calling for early elections due to the fact that an increasing number of people are beginning to believe that this Parliament will not be able to deal with the challenges Turkey is currently faced with.

Turkey does have enough talented individuals who can infiltrate the political system so that it will become contagious and eventually raise the standards of the political system and its parties. However, we cannot simply attempt to get rid of the old political class and just assume that newcomers will be better. We must constantly work to foster political transformation while at the same time injecting better talent into the system. Participation in the political system must be encouraged and steadily increased. NGO's must play a more proactive role in the political process and act as an incubator for both ideas and

talent in politics. The even more critical process will be to encourage more participation from the Turkish youth, a group which definitely has potential candidates for leadership. Over the last 5 years, I have personally witnessed throughout Anatolia highly capable young people who have the potential to become leaders and opinion makers in Turkey. It has been the politicians' goals to keep these people out of politics entirely. It is now our goal to reverse this trend which is why one of the issues that the ARI Movement has pushed for is the lowering of the minimum age for Parliament from 30 to 25. This will play a significant role in motivating young individuals to participate in the political process.

Turkey's biggest problem over the last 15 years has been a lack of leadership resulting in a lack of direction for the country. Ever since Turgut Ozal our country has lacked vision and Turkey has not had a leader who would challenge the status quo and also work to formulate public opinion. This lack of leadership was the clear difference between taking a proactive stance toward the Iraqi issue and continuing the normal reactive policies which Turkey has become accustomed to. In the case of Iraq, once again the latter prevailed and due to the lack of leadership and effort to formulate public opinion, a critical geo-strategic issue for the future of Turkey was mishandled in such a grave way that Turkey has been simply reacting to every development that has occurred.

In all fairness to Turkey's politicians, the country is not an easy one to manage, being a unique country with many different internal and external currents simultaneously pulling it in different directions. When this government came to power, it had the EU, Cyprus and Iraq on its plate, as well as an economic crisis to deal with. It was a challenge indeed and one that would require clear leadership skills during a very difficult time. But thus far instead of rising to this challenge, laissez faire has been the approach taken by government and the opposition has used populist methods in order to take advantage of the opportunity at hand. In all honesty, the majority of the people who voted for the government did not vote for them due to their views on international issues, but rather for what they promised to do domestically. However, because of what has progressed internationally, domestically the government has suffered and markets have been reacting negatively.

In 1991, Turgut Ozal used a lot of political credibility to affect public opinion and consistently spoke with world leaders to remain proactive before, during and after the Iraqi war. The present government chose not to use this methodology and as a result the public had minimal information and misinformation which allowed for a strong anti-war sentiment. Had the government taken the proper steps to formulate public opinion and deepen the public debate, the results may have been different. Interestingly enough, there was a tremendous amount of debate in the media among scholars, businessmen,

columnists, etc. but very limited debate from parliamentarians. A significant majority of the members of Parliament chose not to debate the most important geopolitical issue Turkey has faced in the 12 years since the last war. Voting was done in private out of the public eye and we still do not know what was debated.

Turkey's political life is in shambles for a variety of reasons. But the main reason is the fact that there has not been a concerted effort to place a proper diagnosis on the situation until recently. Until you have the correct diagnosis, it is difficult to find a cure that will lead to recovery. For many years, certain elements of society have encouraged us to simply "make do" with what we have and not demand better standards. For over a decade in Turkey, the political motto was making do with 'the better of many evils.' To put it more plainly, politics was so bad that if anything looked decent at all, it was deemed acceptable because the alternatives were even worse. And for a long time, this is exactly how we were managed. But as time passed, the standards and results declined so much that anything which might have looked decent before could not be allowed to continue.

Two important developments had to occur in Turkish society in order measures to be taken to improve the situation. The first one was recognition by the people that the political situation was indeed a severe crisis and things would get much worse before they got any better. The second one was the process of empowering the people to begin searching for something better. The November 3 elections provided this empowerment. Now the ball is in the people's court. They must continue to be active in every part of the political process. Civil society must become stronger. Issue-based institutes must be formed, foreign policy institutes, and domestic issue-based institutes including education, health, agriculture and social security to name a few. The Turkish media needs to become more responsible for the future of Turkey as it too has a stake in our future. More support must be given to individuals and institutions which are trying to promote new ideas and reform.

For the last nine years, the ARI Movement for instance has been working diligently in Turkey to foster political and social transformation through the creation of a paradigm shift from representative democracy to participatory democracy. Increased participation by the youth in civil society and political issues along with a stronger and more issue-based NGO sector have been the two main pillars of ARI's mission since 1994. 1994 was a critical year in Turkey as a number of new initiatives, both political parties and NGO's, formed for the purpose of creating change in Turkey. Over the last decade, these institutions have been instrumental in fostering change in Turkey. And Turkey has indeed begun the process of change.

Yet more international support must come to the NGO's in Turkey working under extremely difficult circumstances. The US should immediately review its policy on assistance to countries to include grants to NGO's as well as to governments. The EU has adapted this policy and is directly assisting NGO's in Turkey as well as other countries. But the US is still conducting its assistance packages based on a government-to-government basis. This process needs to be realigned with the direction the world is taking. The US has institutions which can handle this responsibility just like the EU has done. The World Bank, Consulates or Embassies can act as project coordinators for NGO related projects. This realignment of assistance programs will add value to the overall process. And it will assist the maturity cycle of countries like Turkey.

As a result of this ongoing maturity cycle, Turkey is becoming a more difficult relationship to manage from the perspective of international relations. The political triangle is slowly breaking up and input into decision-making is increasing from all parts of society. Formulating public opinion is actually a newly-found phenomenon in Turkey. Since issues were never taken into consideration based on public opinion, it always seemed useless to even try to formulate consensus on important issues. This is actually a development which should indeed please the US and the EU as a more developed democracy with a growing civil society and participation of different elements of society emerges. In the geo-political and strategic arena, this kind of development may impede decision-making since it will require more than just a small number of people to push certain issues forward. This type of developing society will eventually demand open debate on issues like Iraq and politicians will not be able to keep these and other issues out of the public eye.

Turkey is in the middle of a very critical period in its history. Many years from now, people will look back on this period between 2000 and 2007 and call it the transition period that defined the Turkey of the next 20 years. As Turkey heads towards its 100th year anniversary in 2023, this transition period will define the direction of the country. Over the last 15 years, Turkey has suffered due to severe political shortcomings. If Turkey is to change this trend, then the next five years will be the period when individuals in society take responsibility for the future instead of constantly being tied to the present. I feel that there are enough responsible people in Turkey who realize the gravity of the situation and will begin to set examples throughout society. The Turkish people deserve and expect no less.